

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 22

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
12 February 1980

Islam's cold shoulder to 'the Persian Gulf doctrine'

By William J. Porter

It has been noted in the White House and in Congress, with some puzzlement, that the reaction of the Muslim world to Mr. Carter's "doctrine" on the Persian Gulf ranged from indifference to hostility. "Any attempt," said the President, "by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States. It will be repelled by use of any means necessary, including military force."

That statement, in its context and timing, is truly remarkable in the light of America's declining influence in Southwest Asia and our limited means to carry on conventional warfare. The statement threatens "any outside force," but does not take into account action by "inside" force against established and friendly governments in the Gulf area. Our recent display of passivity when the Shah of Iran was being pulled down by "insiders" is cited as an example of what awaits other rulers who may be threatened from within by groups teleguided from without.

We are informed that it took our government more than a year to draft the "doctrine," but in his pronouncement of it the President could not say whether any of the governments of the Gulf area were consulted or approved of the principle. It has not always been Mr. Carter's practice to inform even moderate Islamic states about impending US policy changes, as we saw in the case of the Camp David decisions; and oversights of that nature eventually brought about Jordanian and Saudi denunciations of Camp David and all its works.

The ability of the United States to implement "the Persian Gulf doctrine" has evoked much skepticism at home and abroad, the consensus being that the Soviets are unlikely to be deterred.

In his reference to the key element of our military preparedness, a return to conscription, the President's language was weak, incomplete, and very, very political. He hopes "that conscription will not be necessary," and he will "begin" registration (but no conscription) in the spring. It is quite reasonable to assume from this that for the next 10 to 12 months politics will be given priority over national security. Let us all hope that the Soviets

will grant us that period of grace.

In raising the subject of US intelligence-gathering activities, the President noted that our agencies are laboring under "unwarranted restraints." He should be well versed in that sense, because for three years his administration has done very little to attenuate congressional encroachments in that field.

Finally, we should consider the problem of US bases in Pakistan and other places in the region. The outcome of the administration's effort in that regard is already clear: It is improbable that any Muslim states, moderate or otherwise, will make bases available to Mr. Carter's administration, which they regard as the principal ally and benefactor of Israel, and they greatly resent the President's success in separating Egypt from the Arab/Muslim position on the Palestine problem.

The administration, now comprehending that it is in a gigantic poker game with a handful of deuces, has shifted to an effort to gain "access" to military installations in northeast Africa and the Gulf area, but, by an unwise definition of the term "access," it has already damaged that "concept."

What it all means to Muslims is this: For going on 40 years, US administrations, including the present one, have been tilting sharply toward Israel in response to internal pressures and a sense of responsibility to the state which the US created. For all of that period, some Islamic states have tried to cooperate with us, while others turned against us. Gradually, because of that situation and US policy actions elsewhere, our influence, prestige, and reputation for dependability diminished throughout Islam while fear of the Soviet Union remained unchanged or increased. To the Muslim world, the toleration of Soviet domination of Cuba by both US political parties, and by several presidents, was and is a foreboding event.

We now ask Muslims to make common cause with us to restrain the Soviets, but they find little justification for reposing confidence in us and, as matters stand, they are not going to do it.

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